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ABSTRACT

The debate between particularism and pluralism is summarized, and multicultural education policies in six states (California; New York; Minnesota; Portland, Oregon; Milwaukee, Wisconsin; and Walled Lake, Michigan) are described. Recommendations include planning for demographic change, reviewing curriculum policies, and emphasizing staff development and recruitment. (LMI)

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Updating SCHOOL BOARD POLICIES

Volume 21/Number 10/December 1990

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Embracing diversity through multicultural education

by Susan Barto

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Embracing diversity through multicultural education

by Susan Barto

White Americans soon will constitute a minority in the United States. In the 21st century, racial and ethnic groups will outnumber whites for the first time. Consider the following statistics reported in *Time Magazine* in April: at present, one American in four defines himself or herself as Hispanic or nonwhite. If current trends in immigration and birth rates persist, the Hispanic population will have further increased an estimated 21 percent, the Asian presence about 22 percent, blacks almost 12 percent, and whites a little more than two percent when this century ends. Many school districts across the country soon will join our 25 largest cities, where minority students already constitute the overwhelming majority.

These sweeping changes spell what has been dubbed a "demographic imperative" for schools to be pro-active in serving their students. As agents of change, schools have the opportunity (and some would add responsibility) to respect and nurture cultural diversity in society. Rural districts, like the urban districts before them, are trying to meet their changing student populations' needs for bilingual, cultural, and other social services. Failure to meet these challenges could result, indeed has resulted, in low self-esteem among minorities, academic and subsequent economic failure, racial tension, and even death. One need only open a newspaper or turn on the television to learn of another university or pre-collegiate campus incident reflecting racial overtones or blatant racial hatred among students.

Academicians prescribing an "Rx for racism" have recommended varying combinations of the following: confronting and challenging racism, developing and implementing a multicultural curriculum, improving pedagogical practice, increasing the pool of minority teachers and administrators, and teaching character and self-esteem development. The prescription's optimum formula has yet to be developed, but innovations abound across the United States.

Despite growing controversy about multicultural education, according to *Education Week*, virtually all experts who have studied, advocated, and criticized its various forms agree on one point: "such education should provide students with a fuller, more balanced truth about their own history and culture than they have had up to now." Most agree that schools need to do more than establish magnet schools, set aside electives courses, and designate special periods of time such as "Black History Month" to discuss contributions of particular ethnic or racial groups. (*Education Week*, November 28, 1990) These "spot treatments" do not, say the experts, engender the deep-seated cultural understanding necessary to remedy, and ultimately prevent, today's prevailing biases. From there, opinions vary sharply. How, for instance, can schools balance their students' diverse cultural needs in light of the renewed calls for a national curriculum? A highly emotional debate is stirring among educators regarding the process and content of multicultural education.

Ethnocentrism

This school of thought, also characterized as "separatist" or "particularist" contends that multicultural education should tell a story through the eyes of a particular ethnic group. Afrocentrists, for instance, say the curriculum should be centered around the cultural heritage of the black child. "Afrocentricity" has advocates across the country who want schools to move away from the "Eurocentric" curriculum which focuses on western European history and traditions. Educators' lack of understanding of diverse ethnic groups, claim ethnocentrists, can lead to mistakes in estimating students' or groups' intellectual, creative, and language abilities.

One outspoken advocate, Molefi Kete Asante, chairman of the African-American Studies Department at Temple University, claims that African-American children lose their identity in schools using a Eurocentric curriculum. In a sense, he says, this curriculum is "killing our children, killing their minds." In addition to his recommendations on changes to the curriculum, Asante is known for his suggestions that African Americans choose African names, as he has, assume African dress and religion; be taught by African teachers; and learn to love their own culture.

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Yet another proponent of ethnocentrism, Asa G. Hilliard 3rd, an adviser in the Portland and New York state multicultural efforts and the Calloway professor at Georgia State University, claims that "through the omission of information, America's schools have become monocultural environments." (*Phi Delta Kappan*, April 1990) Hilliard and others have pointed to the failure of textbooks to portray ancient Egypt as a black African society as one poignant example of white scholars' intentional bias. Hilliard promotes a much-contested, revisionist view of Egypt's history, attributing the origins of modern medicine, mathematics, ancient philosophy, and even aeronautics to ancient Egypt. Hilliard's views are backed by the current body of research that questions whether ancient Egypt was a black, white, or mixed-race society.

Pluralism

A more moderate, traditional approach to multiculturalism is pluralism, the belief that differences among groups are a national resource rather than a problem to be solved. In the spirit of the Latin phrase "e pluribus unum" engraved on U.S. coins, pluralism stresses that multicultural education should stress the commonalities of many peoples — the one formed from many — as well as talk about their differences.

Diane Ravitch, adjunct professor of history and education at Columbia University, is a leading proponent of pluralism in education. Ravitch emphasizes the common culture, as evidenced in the California History-Social Science Framework, which she helped write. A major strand of this curriculum is called "National Identity," which is self-described as follows: "Students must recognize that American society is now and always has been pluralistic and multicultural....true patriotism celebrates the moral force of the American idea as a nation that unites as one people the descendants of many cultures, races, religions, and ethnic groups." (*American Educator*, Spring 1990)

Ravitch and others have criticized the spread of "particularism" because it insists that no common culture is possible or desirable. Pluralists claim that the particularist brand of history, for instance, fans and recreates ancient hatred. Ravitch suggests that particularists' manner of separating the United States into five distinct cultures — African American, Asian American, European American, Latino/Hispanic, and Native American — ignores the huge cultural, historical, religious, and linguistic differences within these categories. "The child from Cambodia has a cultural background different from the Japanese or Korean child. So, too, do cultural differences exist between children from Puerto Rico and those from Mexico and among black children from different parts of America or the world," Ravitch writes.

Ravitch also warns against particularists' implication that cultural traits are inherited, "a dubious, dangerous form of cultural predestination." (*The American Scholar*, Summer 1990) What, she asks, happens if a child is from a cultural group that has made no significant contribution to science or mathematics? Does that mean that children from that background must find a culturally appropriate field in which to strive? How, she asks, does a teacher find the appropriate "cultural buttons" for children of mixed heritage?

Ravitch is not alone in her skepticism toward the new promoters of cultural diversity. Writes Linda Chavez, former director of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, "My own experience with the promoters of this new ideology suggests that their real is aim is to keep out certain ideas and certain people, to foreclose debate...." (*The Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 18, 1990) Last spring, Chavez' invitation to address graduates at the University of Northern Colorado was rescinded because she is critical of affirmative action and promotes laws to make English the official language of the United States.

In trying to sort through the political, highly emotional rhetoric associated with multicultural education, districts are looking to the experienced states and school districts for direction. Here's a brief summary:

California

California's State Dept. of Education has developed a multicultural History/Social Science Framework for K-12 which will be fully implemented in the 1991-92 school year. The curriculum has 17 distinguishing characteristics with the common thread of democratic principles and civic responsibilities throughout, says Diane Brooks, manager of history, social science, and visual and performing arts for the department. The Framework provides for three years of world history, enough time to examine the civilizations developed in Africa, the Near East, China, India, and elsewhere. Teachers are encouraged to make extensive use of primary sources to incorporate the literature and art of diverse cultures.

Next year, California will distribute revised reading lists for the English Language Arts Framework to include selections representing the cultural diversity in California and the U.S.

New York

In fall of 1989, a task force created by the State Commissioner of Education, Thomas Sobol released a report called "A Curriculum of Inclusion." The task force found that "African Americans, Asian

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Americans, Puerto Ricans/Latinos, and Native Americans have all been victims of intellectual and educational oppression that has characterized the culture and institutions of the United States and European American world for centuries." In February 1990, Sobol asked the New York Board of Regents to endorse a sweeping revision of the history curriculum to make it more multicultural. Subsequently, the Regents have appointed a 24-person panel of eminent scholars and educators to review the state's social studies syllabus. The expected outcome will be a state syllabus and supporting materials which increase students' knowledge of American history and culture, including the diverse groups comprising American society.

In the midst of this study, eight black students filed suit claiming that New York City's school curriculum discriminates against minority students by failing to include the cultural contributions of nonwhites. The case alleges that Sobol has failed to implement the task force's recommendations and that the current curriculum harms black students. While the suit, *Grimes v. Cavazos*, is directed at the U.S. Dept. of Education and not the local school Board, "no Board wants to be put in a position of being charged as racist," says Jay Worona, General Counsel for the New York State School Boards Association.

The Rochester City School District in 1987 adopted a policy on multicultural curriculum development addressing many of the issues now facing the state's Regents. Their policy served as a model now being disseminated by the New York State School Boards Association (see administrators' policy insert).

The policy directs the superintendent and the division of instruction to:

- develop a process to include a multicultural perspective for all subject areas;
- develop procedures and guidelines for textbook selection which include multicultural evaluation criteria;
- develop (when possible) supplementary and/or text material when commercially available materials fail to meet district guidelines for comprehensive and accurate instructional material;
- provide training and in-service to expand the knowledge and background of administrative and teaching staff in the use of materials which contain a multicultural perspective;
- determine the impact of curricular materials with a multicultural perspective on student knowledge, appreciation, and respect for their own and others' cultures; and
- provide administrative guidelines to direct the development of a multicultural perspective, monitor student and staff involvement, and assess the terms of inservice and materials developed and selected.

(*Excerpted from EducatioNEWS*, Robert J. Rader)

Minnesota

Effective in the summer of 1989, Minnesota's State Board of Education passed a rule requiring school Boards to establish and maintain an "inclusive" educational program. Each plan is to describe how the district will eliminate biases in its curriculum, foster an understanding and appreciation for cultural diversity, recognize the wide range of political, economic, and social roles open to students, and acknowledge the historic and contemporary contributions that women, people of color, and persons with handicaps have made to this country. The rule also tells local Boards that they must involve these groups in developing their plans. As a result, many local Boards are forming "multicultural gender-fair advisory committees" to review their schools' curriculum and make recommendations. (*Equity Coalition*, Fall 1989)

Portland, OR

In 1982, following a push by members of the Black United Front, the Portland Public Schools' Board of Education hired Asa Hilliard to bring a substantive multicultural instruction program to the schools. The Board commissioned a group of black academics, under Hilliard's direction, to produce a set of "baseline essays" on the contributions of Africa and African Americans in art, language arts, mathematics, science, social studies, and music. Starting in 1989, teachers have been expected to infuse the information in the essays into the curriculum.

The road to the essays' implementation was not easy, however. Teachers, community members, and observing academicians have refuted some of the essays' content and style. Some have claimed they are too scholarly for practical application, others question the historical content, and still others describe the tone of the essays as hostile toward whites and excessively prideful of black achievements. The essay on science, for example, states that: "Today the science contributions of the Islamic-African science tradition are relatively unknown in the Western world because of the lack of humility of many Medieval European scholars who diligently imitated, copied, and plagiarized the works of many Islamic scientists." Among such "plagiarists" the essay lists Newton, Copernicus, and Galileo. The district plans to produce similar essays over the next few years on the contributions of Asians, Hispanics, Native Americans, and Pacific Islanders. Portland's program now serves as a model in Atlanta, Detroit, Milwaukee, Washington, D.C., and elsewhere.

Milwaukee, WI

Observing that only 20 percent of black male high school students in their public schools had "C" or better averages, eleven percent were held back, and half of all students suspended were black males, the Milwaukee School Board last year established an African-American Male Task Force to study and make recommendations to improve academic success of these students. In September, the Board okayed a plan to designate one elementary and one middle school as African-American Immersion Schools beginning in the fall of 1991.

While girls and non-blacks will be able to attend the two schools, the curriculum will have programs and activities aimed exclusively at the social, emotional, and academic needs of African-American male students. Among the schools' objectives will be raising self-esteem and self-awareness along with cultural identity and heritage. The hoped-for result will be improved commitment to better academic performance. Initially, the Board's African-American Male Task Force requested an all-male faculty to expose young men to male role models, but subsequent legal counsel has advised that such a practice would violate hiring laws. Instead, each day students will meet with a black, male "student advocate" from the community.

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Kenneth Holt, coordinator of the immersion project, says that, in addition to the Afrocentric curriculum, the schools will incorporate methods he hopes will spread throughout the district in subsequent years, such as restructured scheduling allowing longer periods of time spent on particular subjects, a 20-to-one student-teacher ratio, extended days, year-round education, parenting workshops, and daily mentoring sessions. "The past determines your future," says Holt, who now is gathering "a cadre of experts to help the schools' staff deal with the cultural origins and traditions of the students" represented in the schools.

Holt added that the community has demanded, and the school district is still developing, multicultural curriculum in all schools representing all ethnicities in the district. The Board, however, saw the greatest need among black males and to implement such a program districtwide at this time would be too costly.

Walled Lake, MI

"In the winter of 1989, a minor disturbance at Walled Lake Western High School called attention to the need for students to learn to recognize the complexity of issues relating to different cultures," write three administrators in the October 1990 issue of *Michigan School Board Journal*. With an enrollment of more than 9,000, Walled Lake reports an addition of more than 1,000 new pupils of various races, nationalities, and cultures over the past three years. In response to the disturbance and to better accommodate their newly-found diversity, the staff, parents, and students devised a multicultural committee. The committee created a mission statement, "Together We Can," which appears on all school communications. In addition, the committee developed the following programs:

- a K-12 curriculum of ethnic and cultural awareness;
- semi-annual retreats for approximately 50, ethnically-diverse students to develop communication, conflict resolution, and decision-making skills;
- weekly lunches for four minority students hosted by the principal;
- new student orientation;
- volunteer "buddy" program for minority students;
- school assemblies and staff inservices focusing on prejudice and cultural awareness;
- student exchange days with other schools;
- rumor control initiative with local media, an effort to present factual information to offset future negative news about the school;
- cable television program to publicize the schools' programs;
- revision of Code of Conduct to prohibit ethnic intimidation;
- parent education;
- ethnic fair; and
- re-vamped daily communication program.

While it is too early, they say, to claim the high school's student body has been totally unified, there have been no disturbances like the one last year.

Recommendations

Boards wishing to address their district's approach to multicultural education many wish to consider the following:

Plan for demographic change. Student enrollment changes as a result of changes in birth rate, migration patterns, and social conditions. The birthrate in a specific area can be predicted through studying:

- the number of women of childbearing age;
- community expectations of family size; and
- past history of family planning efforts and abortion rates.

Thomas A. Glass (ERIC Clearinghouse, October 1990) recommends comparing enrollments by grade level to establish migration rates. "If a 1989 freshman class of 325 became a sophomore class of 300 in 1990, this indicates a loss of 25 students or a 7.6 percent negative migration rate. Over time, consistent data collection can show approximately how many students a school district is gaining or losing, at what level, and during what time of year."

Review curriculum policies. School districts are facing increasing pressures from federal, state, and local sources to include various disciplines into the curriculum. How can the Board stay on top of these pressures and ensure a fair, coherent, effective curriculum for the districts' students? NSBA's 1990-91 Resolution, "School Board Responsibility for Curriculum" reads: "NSBA encourages local Boards to take an active role in overseeing the process of development and maintenance of their districts' curriculum and instruction, including:

(a) assessing the district's current curriculum in light of the curricular needs of the district;

(b) updating written policies on curriculum and instruction to assure they are clearly defined and appropriate to the needs of the students;

(c) seeking widespread community input from students, teachers, administrators, parents, and the public at large regarding curriculum and instruction;

(d) becoming directly involved with the advice and recommendations of the school district's administrators, teachers, and other curriculum experts, in the process of choosing curricular materials, even in those states where statewide adoption of textbooks prevails.

NSBA's Beliefs and Policies contain the following statement regarding Curriculum and Educational Opportunities: "Curriculum offerings should consider students' needs, ability, and cultural and socioeconomic background."

Furthermore, William R. Force, a professor of school administration at Grand Valley State University, recommends that Boards ask themselves the following questions:

- Do you have a Board policy that not only pledges the Board's support for continuous curriculum development but also directs administrators to involve teachers in developing the curriculum and selecting teaching materials?
- Do you have a Board-approved long-range plan or curriculum cycle that says which curricular area is to be evaluated, developed or improved, and adopted by the Board each year?
- Is there a way to alter a long-range plan or cycle if new or different needs arise?
- Do policies call for teachers from all levels and schools to be well represented in curriculum development? Are principals involved so they will understand teachers' concern and program subtleties and be committed to the program's success?
- Do you ensure that the school system's curriculum study committee receives clear written outlines of their responsibilities?
- Do you make it known that you expect curriculum study committees to base their recommendations on the school system's goals, sound instructional practice, and a base of knowledge?
- Does each curriculum study committee have a plan for two-way communication with teachers, students, and school Board members throughout its deliberations?
- Do you have procedures for getting suggestions from parents and other citizens while the curriculum is being worked on and before it is adopted by the school Board?
- After the committees have deliberated, members of the public have had their say, and the school Board has adopted the curriculum, does the Board provide

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> enough money to pay for the materials, time, and staff development needed to implement the curriculum successfully? (*American School Board Journal*, September 1988)

Inextricably tied to a multicultural curriculum is the Board's need to address the language needs of limited English proficient (LEP) students. For a review of LEP programs in the U.S., see Page 4.

Emphasize staff recruitment and development. The Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith (ADL) predicts that the percentage of minority teachers in the nation's school districts will have decreased from 12.5 percent in 1980 to less than five percent in the year 2000. The ADL laments this forecast because "minority teachers serve as role models for their students and bring their cultural perspectives to teaching. A diverse teaching force also offers all students the opportunity to see a cross-section of people in leadership positions." (ADL, 1989)

Regardless of their ethnicity, all teachers need sustained, committed staff development to function effectively in ethnically-diverse classrooms. Teachers and staff should become familiar with the cultures and learning styles represented in their classrooms as well as promote an atmosphere of acceptance and cooperation. ■